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SUITABILITY OF ESKIMO METHODS OF WINTER TRAVEL IN SCIENTIFIC EXPLORATION.

BY

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The most recent maps of Canada show its archipelagoes stretching towards the Pole with their coast lines roughly determined and occasionally incomplete, and with their interiors blank of river, lake or mountain. Evidently, geographical needs are here still unsatisfied, while the geology, natural history and ethnology of the region have scarce had their beginnings. Had we the men and the money, a large work would be ready to our hand. The difficulties of exploring this region scientifically are not serious, and the *necessary* expense is small compared to the usual cost of Arctic work. That is, at least, the belief of the writer and the thesis of this paper.

There is a saying current throughout the north country of America—Labrador and Alaska alike: "Look out for the man with one blanket!" Being interpreted, the meaning is that if you meet a traveller with a large outfit, with many rifles for varied uses, with sleeping bags, specially designed tents and camp outfits and ingenious devices to meet the most remotely conceivable need—if you meet that sort of a traveller, you need have no fear he will go farther than you have ever succeeded in penetrating, nor fare smoothly even the short distance he goes. But when you see a man whose baggage is a rifle, fish net and blanket, you have either an experienced traveller or one wise beyond his years.

The men of the far north—Slave Lake and beyond—have reduced their methods to the perfection of simplicity. A Scotchman who was formerly a carpenter in Edmonton has been living alone for years on the north shore of Bear Lake on the product of his net and gun—and that is the musk-ox country into which our great hunters make furtive incursions with loaded sleds, and return in a few weeks with a trophy or two to write a five-hundred page account of their adventures and hardships. And these adventures are genuine and the hardships real, for an inexperienced man can suffer where one who knows how lives in comfort. The Canadian Royal North West Mounted Police each year carry mail across the mountains from Dawson to Macpherson on the Peel; the achievement is creditable enough, and we have magazine articles about it; but last year

Darrell (who accompanied Hanbury on his wonderful journey through Arctic Canada) carried that mail across, and he did it differently. Where the police had guides, he had none, though this was his first crossing of the mountains; where they had several sleds and a tent, he had one sled and no tent; and where they had dogs to pull the sleds, he pulled his own sled behind him with his mail bag and food supply. That was perhaps the most wonderful journey ever undertaken in Arctic Canada, and Darrell finished it in comfort and said nothing about it—the newspapers merely noted in a few words that mail had arrived from the imprisoned whalers in the Beaufort Sea.

The writer has no thought of saying that such undertakings are practicable or even safe for the average traveller; but among our millions there should be at least a few who, by undertaking smaller things at first and gradually mastering the technique of travel, could come to equal the best achievements of the past and even set new standards. It goes without saying that the “man with one blanket” travels faster and more cheaply than one cumbered with baggage and obsessed with the idea that this luxury and that convenience cannot be left behind.

But to come to the direct consideration of the little-known north of Canada with its outlying islands: this section of country is now, or has been, throughout the greater portion of its extent, inhabited by the people known as Eskimos. Evolution through centuries has ground these northerners into well-nigh perfect adaptation to their surroundings, so that they live in well-being and a general high degree of creature comfort in one of the least fruitful sections of the world. If they can dwell there in comfort, bringing up their children and taking care of their old and feeble, is it not reasonable to suppose that in the same country a few of our hardier young men could live for a few years under similar conditions and bring back note-books and maps of value? True, it is in many localities difficult to transport such natural history collections as are much to be desired, but in most places they could be gotten together and cached in some point accessible to ships either from the east or west (whalers, etc.).

“Do in Rome as the Romans do” is the traveller’s golden rule under most circumstances, and nowhere does this hold more rigidly than for the north. For that reason it is one of the least explicable things in the history of Arctic exploration that Eskimo methods of travel were not sooner and more generally adopted. There may be considerable reason in the explanation frequently given—that the

English mind (cf. our historic General Braddock) is unwilling in general to learn from savages or the men of the frontier; a significant consideration also is that men of the Franklin and Richardson type were unfamiliar with Eskimos, but carried Indian methods of travel into the Eskimo country. True, Indian methods are not so bad as those developed by whites farther south, and many of these early overland Arctic journeys are of a high class—especially Dr. Rae's. Perhaps the most important thing in winter travel is ability to build a snow house, and it is little less than tragic that so late as the time of Kane and Hayes men came near freezing to death in the open, when an hour and a half of work would have built a snow house to shelter the entire party and keep them in warmth and comfort through a night that came near costing several lives. Americans can take some comfort in the fact, however, that it was Peary who first had the good sense to discard "approved Arctic clothing" (made in Europe) for Eskimo clothes, "especially designed sleds" for Eskimo sleds, and tents for the snow house. That he has learnt these things and others from the inhabitants of the lands he has explored is one of the cornerstones of his success, perhaps the greatest contributing factor towards his preëminence as the master of the technique of winter travel.

It is true that Commander Peary's expeditions are expensive, but that is largely in the cost of ships and the pay of men that are needed to get within striking distance of the Pole. In the Canadian Arctic, however, many a little known shore is approached yearly by whalers, both from the east and the west, and to be landed on one of them could be arranged at a slight expense. It is true that wherever one is landed, it would be safer, if one had the resources, to have a few sacks of flour or rice, or some other simple food, landed and cached as a base to retreat upon in case of misfortune in fishing or hunting, but one or two hundred dollars will buy a good deal of staple food from a whaling captain.

Whatever the purpose of the undertaking, one should at once upon landing associate himself with Eskimos for the purpose of learning their methods of securing food, of building houses, and of travel. The Eskimos, in all regions familiar by experience or hearsay to the writer, are friendly and hospitable and are easy to get along with for a man of reasonable discretion. For dealing with them, staple goods should be taken into any section where the people have been in contact with whites (tea, tobacco, flour, etc.), but needles, files, etc., to the less-known sections. On the whole, travel in the inhabited sections of the Arctic islands and the north coast

of Canada should be a good deal cheaper than the most modest European tour of the same length of time.

Scientific exploration can be carried forward by Eskimo dog sleds in winter and Eskimo skin boats in summer (though a whale boat would be preferable), wherever game or fish is sufficient. For most purposes it is best to arrange the trips to conform with Eskimo habits as to season, for those habits have their reason in the natural conditions of the country. At certain times of year the Eskimo go inland to hunt caribou or musk-ox; that should also be the explorer's season for investigating the interior of whatever section is available; in the fishing season the people are on the coast, and then boat voyages can best be undertaken. It is a good thing to have along a tent for summer or early fall use and also (on the mainland) for going into timbered sections where snow houses cannot be built. If one can have some condensed food (malted milk, pemmican, etc.) landed where one is put ashore, that would be advantageous, though not at all indispensable for winter journeys by sled—for the lightness of the load determines largely how far one can penetrate into gameless sections.

As to the comfort of a winter with the Eskimos, it seems to the writer better than argument or citations to make a personal statement for those who care to take his word as an index of the facts. The Eskimo houses he has known (between the Colville River, Alaska, and Cape Brown east of the Mackenzie) are comfortable and fairly well-ventilated; snow houses make so warm a camp in the worst weather that one can sleep comfortably in light blankets (temperature, say, $+45^{\circ}$ F.) while any clothes that have been damp from the previous day are hung up to dry against the morning. The diet during the winter 1906-7 was fish (eaten raw or cooked), and whale blubber—no salt or other food of any kind. The writer found it no less healthful than the Eskimos did, and gained in weight twenty pounds during the winter. The entire year was such as to make him not at all reluctant to return to the same country and same mode of life for another year; his conclusion from the experience of thirteen months was that there is much opportunity in the Arctic for good scientific work in new fields with less than half the discomfort and less than a tenth of the expense that are usually wasted on such undertakings. There was enough costly and worthless Norwegian fur clothing thrown away on one of the recent polar expeditions to pay the expense of a modest scientific journey to the Arctic, and the added sum paid for "specially designed" sleds too fragile for their use would bring the amount to a handsome figure.